'radical experimentalism.'"[5] It deepened my project's discussion of Mark Fisher's concepts of "lost futures" and "strange simultaneity."[6]

On the last of these, *Erasure* was the most useful novel I had encountered to my analysis of post-postmodernism's vexed relationship with time. Everett's novel broadened my understanding that legacies of modernism are flawed claims of progress and evolution, signposted by an additional "post" prefix – or two – that only complicate(s) matters. In other words, the timing of my introduction to Everett's work untangled and shaped my PhD's central discussion of time. And now, almost four years after I first read *Erasure*, I have read almost all of Everett's work; have published on *Erasure* and three other Everett novels (with forthcoming work on additional novels and short stories of his); and am trying to secure funding for a monograph on race, labour, and masculinity in his fiction. It is clear to me that my PhD supervisor Mike's recommendation of *Erasure* was *vital* – to the work I hope to continue doing and the academic career I hope to have.

2024 has already seen an adaptation of this novel win an Academy Award, and by the time this piece appears in print, Everett's latest novel, *James*, will have been published. Revisiting *Erasure*'s themes of literary legacy, para- and intertexts, and histories of inequality, *James* looks set to ensure that Everett has another big year. The belated recognition and praise look set to continue, further complicating Everett's timing, which is fitting for a novel that reimagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) from the perspective of Jim, Huck's enslaved companion. Time has always been at the heart of Everett's project.

Erasure's problematic but fascinating relationship with it is announced in its opening lines. The narrative occupies the space of afterlife, generated by the textual impossibility established by the immediate suggestion that we are reading Thelonious "Monk" Ellison's "journal": "My journal is a private affair, but I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious condition of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages."[7] In the same breath as introducing himself, Monk confesses that "it should not much matter to me who sees what or when," as his death has been announced seconds before his character is born, as it were.[8] As is often the case in Everett's work, the authorial decision made is captivating, and the timing of the decision is essential.

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FAILURE AS CONSTRUCTION: ELIZABETH MCHENRY'S *TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE*

Elizabeth McHenry's *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice and African American Authorship* was the first book I read after I submitted my PhD

[5] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 33.
[6] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: John Hunt Publishing, 2014), 17.
[7] Percival Everett, *Erasure* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 3. [8] Ibid.

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thesis.[1] It had been sitting on my shelf for several months but I could tell that, during my final revisions, opening the book would open up too many new paths that I wouldn't have time to follow. I was right. At this key juncture in my career, when one project was ending and question marks were appearing in my head about what was next for me, *To Make Negro Literature* crystallized exactly who I want to be as a researcher and the stories I would like to tell with my work. Although the book focusses on a period slightly before that of my own research and on authors who were broadly unfamiliar to me, McHenry's combination of archival research and close reading offers a model for the methodology I hope to achieve.

Beginning with an assessment of W. E. B. Du Bois's short-lived journal *Moon Illustrated Weekly* (1905–6), McHenry argues that critics who position the *Moon* as a precursor to Du Bois's following venture, the far more successful *Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, obscure the particularities of Du Bois's failure to his career. This brief window into an unexplored moment in the life of one of the most prominent African American intellectuals reveals McHenry's main interest in the book, to centre literary projects that have been dismissed or ignored by history and projects that outright failed. As she argues in her introduction, "Literary history seldom privileges that which is unsuccessful, whether in terms of writers and texts never recognized by publication, or projects that remained incomplete or unfulfilled. But these writers, texts, and projects are no less a part of literary history" (5). In particular, by remembering African American literary failures, in a society where white people deemed Black culture to be incompatible with intellectual life, we can see how remarkable the continued endeavours of these authors were.

McHenry's focus on a short window of time, from around 1890 to 1910, a period that is often subsumed into either the early period of Reconstruction or into an extended understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, resists attempts to stretch out literary movements into "the long nineteenth century" or "modernism". She argues instead for specificity, and particularly a recovery of the time Rayford Logan terms the "nadir" of race relations in the US.[2] McHenry's interest is in a moment of time "when African American literature *doesn't* cohere" (11) and how this coherence was achieved.

Across four chapters, McHenry focusses on forms of literary production that are often disregarded: books sold by subscription, reference works, works that remained unpublished. The key focus of the book's first half is on literary communities and collaboration. The first chapter, on what McHenry terms "racial schoolbooks," explores how volumes of writing by various Black authors were compiled and curated to be circulated to educate young African Americans in the South and the Midwest. "Thinking Bibliographically," the book's second chapter, explores lists of works of African American literature that were used to make Black print cultures visible and useable. These forms of writing, often deemed functional and thereby perfunctory, were essential to making the concept of "Negro literature" comprehensible.

The third and fourth chapters of *To Make Negro Literature* turn to forms of authorship that have been unrecognized by history. The fact that T. Thomas

[1] Elizabeth McHenry, *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice and African American Authorship* (2021). Page references are given parenthetically in the text.

[2] Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial, 1954).

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Fortune wrote many of the works published under Booker T. Washington's name is relatively well known. What McHenry does in her chapter, though, is to demonstrate how Fortune's project was to centre authorship and print within Black leadership. At the same time, she focusses on how Fortune's own ambitions of authorship were never fulfilled. This aspect of literary failure continues into the final, and most accomplished, chapter, which explores the case of Mary Church Terrell. While Terrell had success as a journalist and activist in early twentieth-century America, McHenry uncovers her desire to publish short stories: Terrell's archives at the Library of Congress are full not only of these stories but also of dozens of rejection letters from literary magazines. McHenry argues that Terrell used this rejection as a form of protest against a publishing industry that lacked interest in creative works by African American authors.

The purpose of each chapter is not to reclaim undiscovered great works of literature or even to encourage wider criticism on its subject. Rather, the book's purpose is to show what a centring of literary failure can tell us about how African American literary culture developed, and from where both Black readers and writers emerged. We see the obstacles that African American authors faced in attempting to establish literary careers but also how these obstacles were manoeuvred.

Both *To Make Negro Literature* and McHenry's previous book, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002), work to excavate Black literary histories that have been neglected. More than this, though, through her focus on forms of literature which are often excluded from common definitions of literature – the unpublished, the factual, the ghostwritten – McHenry expands our understanding of literary studies, opening up innumerable avenues of research. In its narrow focus and close attention to its subjects, *To Make Negro Literature* is as generous as it is rigorous, and will shape many future scholars' research, including my own.

In recent years, African American literary studies has taken an archival turn, both with the rediscoveries of novels like Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille* and in critical writing that centres the archive, including Jean-Christophe Cloutier's *Shadow Archives* and, most recently, Laura Helton's *Scattered and Fugitive Things*.[3] The possibilities of discovery in African American literature feel endless. What McHenry shows us, however, is that we cannot ignore the unfinished or the unsuccessful in our understanding of Black cultural history. As I move forward into the next stage of my research career, I, too, hope to find threads that are impossible to follow, to centre findings that do not seem to add to much, or, as McHenry puts it, "to contribute important fragments to the literary history that is our collective responsibility to reconstruct" (238).

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[3] Jean-Chrostophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2019); Laura E. Helton, *Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2024).

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